

State's lawmakers take education-funding ideas on road

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Lawmakers will take education-spending ideas on the road, but they will dodge the big question: Where will the cash come from?

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Washington state senators from both parties are taking education-spending ideas on the road to get citizen input. But they plan to mostly avoid the biggest issue in the debate: Where will the money come from?

Sen. Bruce Dammeier, R-Puyallup, acknowledges the proposal being shopped around to fix the local school-levy system and the statewide teacher-pay system is incomplete. But Dammeier, the vice chairman of both the Senate Education and Ways and Means committees, says the money is a political issue that will be resolved during the legislative session.

"There's a number of ways to get there. Levy fairness is a big step," Dammeier said.

The chairman of the House Appropriations Committee said his Senate colleagues are skipping an important step needed to solve the impasse on the education budget related to the Supreme Court's McCleary decision.

The listening tour began this past week in Vancouver.

Rep. Hans Dunshee, D-Snohomish, expects the feedback from the tour will be that senators need to face the real problem: inadequate state funding for education.

Senate education leaders, he said, disagree with the House and the state Supreme Court about how much more money Washington needs to spend on education.

“At this point, if we got to agreement on the size of the problem, that would be a major accomplishment,” Dunshee said. “We’ll talk about solutions later, after we define the problem.”

That statement hints at just how far apart lawmakers are — even those from the same political party — on meeting the requirements of the 2012 McCleary decision that said the way the state pays for public schools is unconstitutional.

Since August, the court has been fining the Legislature \$100,000 a day until it can come up with a plan to meet the lawsuit’s requirements. Lawmakers have said they are unlikely to come to an agreement before the Legislature reconvenes in January.

The governor set up a bipartisan work group to find a solution, and that group has met once.

“My focus will be on adequate funding,” Dunshee said. “If we do the right thing, the court issue will go away.”

Sen. Christine Rolfes, D-Bainbridge, thinks lawmakers can do both things: answer the Supreme Court with a plan concerning the education budget and make the policy changes outlined in Senate Bill 6130 that is being touted on the tour.

The complex bill would set up a new, market-based salary model for teachers and educators, requiring a comparable wage analysis every four years to keep salaries competitive. It would transfer local school-levy collections into a statewide property tax to support education. The provisions of the proposal would be phased in over nearly a decade.

The statewide teachers union has spoken against the bill as it stands.

The Senate Education Committee’s listening tour is to visit Anacortes on Tuesday, Bremerton on Thursday, Renton on Oct. 19, Spokane on Oct. 21, Wenatchee on Oct. 26 and Yakima on Oct. 27. The meetings are from 5 to 7 p.m. in the Education Service District offices in those cities.

“I’ve heard all legislators involved say we need to come up with guidelines to move the Legislature forward to do what’s best for kids,” Rolfes said. “We should be able to get a plan.”

Rolfes believes the tour will complement the efforts of the governor’s working group.

“There’s no real reason we can’t get a plan put together, unless people just don’t want to fund the schools. Then that’s a discussion they need to be having openly with their constituents,” Rolfes said.

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